DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 971 RC 023 264

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TITLE Rural Home Schooling and Place-Based Education. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-RC-01-9
PUB DATE 2001-12-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0027
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348. Tel: 800-624-9120 (Toll Free). For full text: http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc01-9.htm.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Active Learning; *Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; *Experiential Learning; *Home Schooling; Integrated Curriculum; *Interpersonal Competence; Parents as Teachers; *Rural Education; Socialization
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Place Based Education; Sense of Community

ABSTRACT

Place-based education, which draws from local culture, history, and geography to create a meaningful curriculum, holds particular promise for rural homeschooling. Following a brief review of the homeschooling phenomenon, this digest identifies ways that rural place-based education can counter common concerns about homeschooling. In 1999 about 1.7 percent of U.S. school children (2.2 percent in rural areas) were schooled at home because of parents' educational, religious, or social attitudes or beliefs. The flexibility inherent in homeschooling allows an individualized approach to instruction and curriculum that capitalizes on student interests and community learning opportunities. Most homeschooling parents design their own curriculum. A major criticism of homeschooling is the social isolation of the student. Place-based education can address socialization issues by immersing children in the daily routines of their communities, exposing them to local behavior norms and belief systems, and showing them how one functions as a contributing member of society. Criticisms of the methods and materials of homeschooling can be countered by a place-based approach that integrates separate disciplines and subject matter with home and community projects. Student interests combine with daily living activities and practical experience in various interconnected subjects to provide both practical and academic knowledge. Several examples of rural community-based education are given, and rural community resources are discussed. (Contains 22 references.) (TD)

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ED 459 971

ERIC DIGEST

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ERIC Digest
EDO-RC-01-9

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December 2001

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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RC 023 264

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EDO-RC-01-9 December 2001

Rural Home Schooling and Place-Based Education

Rebecca Jaycox

Place-based education, which draws from local culture, history, and geography to create a meaningful curriculum, can occur in any type of setting, but it holds particular promise for rural homeschooling. Place-based educators use local particulars to teach universal concepts, engage students in community life, and involve people and resources unique to the home community. This Digest identifies ways that place-based education can counter common concerns about homeschooling so that homeschooled students—especially those living in rural areas—receive academic, social, and individual benefits.

Homeschooling in the Rural United States

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an estimated 850,000 U.S. students were being homeschooled in 1999, comprising 1.7 percent of the nation's school-age population. In rural areas, the percentage of homeschooled students was 2.2 percent—slightly higher than the national average. About one third (32.4 percent) of the homeschooling population lives in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census classification (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001).

Parents who commit to homeschooling do so for a variety of reasons. Nearly half believe they can give their children a better education at home; others have religious reasons (38 percent) or consider the learning environments at their local schools to be of poor quality (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001). A small percentage (2.7) of parents indicated "transportation convenience" as an important reason for homeschooling. A recent study did document long bus rides for rural students (about a quarter lasting more than an hour each way), often over poor or mountainous roads (Howley & Howley, 2001). Regardless of the reasons, interest and participation in homeschooling are increasing.

Place-Based Education and Rural Homeschooling

Rural parents who homeschool have an opportunity to instill in their children an appreciation for local values and places, and to integrate the local ecology and economy into the students' education. Orr (1992) gives several reasons for integrating place-based study into education:

- to join intellect with experience
- to address problems of overspecialization in the world today
- to help people learn how to live well where they are
- to strengthen understanding of the significance of relationships among different places, both local and global

Through such an approach, which can be employed in schools or at home, young people can learn more about how to live productive and meaningful lives in their home communities (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998).

Homeschooling offers opportunities to take different, more individualized approaches to instruction and curriculum in order to capitalize on students' interests and learning preferences and community learning opportunities. In other words, the flexibility inherent in homeschooling can be used to students' advantage in various ways.

Although studying homeschoolers is a difficult task (Hill, 2000), evidence reveals that homeschoolers do not always grasp the opportunity to vary from traditional classroom approaches (Webb, 1990). Some stick to traditional educational practices (such as fixed schedules, structured study environments, and standardized curricula and tests) whether or not these practices serve educational goals (Whitehead & Bird, 1984). However, a study of more than 1,600 families (Ray, 1997) showed that 71 percent of homeschooling parents design their own curricula, compared with nearly 24 percent who purchase and use a complete curriculum package.

Homeschooling's Effects on Society

One concern surrounding the homeschooling movement is that personal independence and self-sufficiency will take precedence over what is best for society at large. Critical observers of homeschooling argue that those who practice this form of education are giving up on solving common problems and that social stratification is a consequence of their actions (Apple, 2000; Lubienski, 2000). Underlying these concerns are commitments to the common school, including shared goals and strengthening community.

In response, supporters–also arguing from a critical perspective–contend that the current public education system is defined more by national economic interests than by local concerns and commitments (Davidson, 1996). People making this argument view homeschoolers' exit from the public school system as a withdrawal from political and business control, rather than as a withdrawal from society and the common good (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991).

For other supporters of homeschooling, withdrawal from society may indeed be one of the goals. Van Galen (1991) explains that religious conservatives who have chosen homeschooling usually want their children to learn a religious way of life and develop conservative social and political perspectives. These parents establish homeschools to teach their children that "the family is the most important institution in society" (p. 35).

Public schools may not be doing any better at creating societal cohesion than homeschoolers, however. Research has shown that graduates of large, diverse public high schools are *less* likely than homeschooled youth to express tolerant attitudes, to volunteer time and money for social causes, or to participate in community events (Hill, 2000).

Homeschooling and Socialization

Both supporters and opponents of homeschooling emphasize the importance of learning necessary social skills (Webb, 1990; Whitehead & Bird, 1984). A major criticism of homeschooling is the social isolation of the student (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991). However, the public school process of sorting children by age and ability and isolating them from their parents and siblings can produce its own forms of social isolation (Howley, DeYoung, & Theobald, 1996). The tacit lesson in such an arrangement can be conformity (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991).

Medlin (2000) separates the socialization issue into three goals that can guide home educators:

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1. participation of homeschooled children in daily routines of their local communities
2. acquisition of rules of behavior and systems of beliefs and attitudes needed both during their education and later in life
3. ability to function effectively as contributing members of society

Attending to these socialization goals may help guide parents in planning activities that encompass a concern for others, whether they live in one's own rural community or in a distant city or nation.

Academic Value of Methods and Curriculum

Another criticism of homeschooling is that modern teaching methods and materials are not always used. Underlying this criticism is an assumption that professional educators generally know "what works" to educate children–a much debated assumption. What is clearer is that both groups of educators–public school teachers and homeschooling parents–can be overwhelmed by the number of subjects that need to be taught.

A growing number of educators in small schools and homeschools have discovered that place-based methodologies can be used to integrate separate disciplines and subject matter with home and community projects. Student interests combine with daily living activities and practical experience in a variety of interconnected subjects to help children gain both practical and academic knowledge (Webb, 1990).

Activities specific to place-based education might concentrate on community themes, local occupations and hobbies, local government and history, or community concerns (Knapp, 1996). The homeschooled student can be guided to collect, organize, and analyze relevant information; produce a worthwhile project or result from their study; and reflect on and self-assess progress.

A well-known example of rural place-based education is Foxfire, initiated by Eliot Wigginton in the late 1960s (Wigginton, 1985). Youth interviewed members of the local community, unearthing and publishing a multitude of stories from the residents. Foxfire has grown into a teaching and learning method used in a variety of educational settings. The method stresses 11 core ideals that include active learning; an audience beyond the teacher; and connections among the classroom work, surrounding communities, and the world beyond (Foxfire Fund, 2001).

Another example of community-based learning is the PACERS Small Schools Cooperative, initiated by the University of Alabama, in which students have become community historians, scientists, and artists (PACERS, 2001). Participating schools incorporate local needs into the curriculum, creating projects as varied as a community newspaper and a small business that builds computers for local residents (Cedar Bluff School, 2001; Gaylesville School, 2001).

One innovative program, "Elders' Wisdom, Children's Song," encourages communication between older community members and school-age children. Students interview community elders and develop songs, plays, public recitations, artwork, and publications based on their stories (Community Celebration of Place, 2001).

Although rural areas may lack such homeschooling resources as museums, Internet communications, and expansive libraries, other assets abound, as these school-based examples illustrate. The knowledge and experience of elders, the close proximity to the natural environment, and the skills and practical knowledge of rural residents who live without metropolitan conveniences can be valuable resources for homeschooling. By utilizing these unique resources, students may obtain practical experience in a variety of interconnected subjects. The community becomes not only the classroom but also the audience for the students' accomplishments (Knapp, 1996).

Summary

Homeschooling parents can guide their children in discovering and appreciating the values, economy, history, and ecology of their home communities. At the same time, they can provide for children's academic learning and social development. These goals can be reached by planning activities that combine real-life experience with academic learning; using an interdisciplinary approach; and working in cooperation with others in the community to accomplish projects or produce useful products. Rural homeschools offer unusual flexibility and opportunities for practicing a place-based approach to education that can benefit both the students and their communities.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0027. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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